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SPEECH

OF

MR. THADDEUS STEVENS, OF PENNSYLVANIA,

*In the House of Representatives, on the Reference of the President's
Annual Message.*

Made in Committee of the Whole, February 20, 1850.

Mr. STEVENS, of Pennsylvania, said :

MR. CHAIRMAN : I do not know that I should have troubled the Committee at this time, could I see any reasonable prospect that the House would devote its time to practical legislation. But, for a considerable time after our meeting, the organization of the House was obstructed ; and, since organized, a large portion of its time has been occupied by speeches on the subject of Slavery, mostly by Southern gentlemen, when no practical question, to which they could apply, was before the Committee. There was no doubt a well-defined object in this, partly to intimidate Congress, and partly to occupy its time, so that no legislation could be matured obnoxious to Southern gentlemen. Indeed we are not left to conjecture on this point. The learned gentleman from North Carolina, [Mr. CLINGMAN,] who was selected to open the debate in behalf of human bondage, distinctly notified us, that unless Congress, as a condition precedent, submitted to settle the Slavery question, according to Southern demands, there should be no legislation, even to the passage of the ordinary appropriation bills necessary to sustain the Government ; and that such measures would not be obstructed by meeting them in manly debate, and voting on their merits, but by incessantly calling the yeas and nays, on repeated and frivolous motions to adjourn, until the end of the session. Sir, I doubt not that, before he ventured on so high a threat, he had full assurances from a sufficient number of Southern gentlemen to carry it into effect. For, if he had made it upon his own bare authority, it would degenerate into contemptible gasconade, which I am sure that discreet gentleman would not indulge in. The scenes of last Monday in this House fully sustain him, and showed that they had the will and the power to execute it.

Here, then, we have a well-defined and palpable conspiracy of Southern members combined to stop the supplies necessary to the existence of the Government, disorganize and dissolve it, until the bands that bind the Union together are severed, and, as a gentleman early in the session desired, "discord reigns." Well might the gentleman anticipate that the country and posterity would pronounce this treason, rank treason against the nation ! Sir, I doubt if there is another legislative body in the world where such sedition would not be followed by prosecution and punishment. France has lately exiled members of her Assembly for a similar offence. But in this glorious country, where nearly two-thirds of the people are free, we can say anything within these walls or beyond them with impunity, unless it be to agitate in favor of human liberty—that is *aggression* !

Let us inquire, what is the grave offence, the mighty wrong, which can justify a threat big with such portentous consequences? The refusal of Congress to propagate or to establish a doubtful or even an admitted good in the Territories would surely be no cause for rebellion and revolution—much less would the refusal to extend an evil, an admitted evil, an unmitigated wrong. Will an intelligent and free posterity believe it, when impartial history records that the only cause for this high threat was the apprehension that the Congress of this *free* Republic would not propagate, nor permit to be propagated, the institution of human Slavery into her vast Territories now free? Yet such is the simple fact. It is proper, then, to inquire whether the thing sought to be forced upon the Territories at the risk of treason and rebellion be a good or an evil. I think it is a great evil, which ought to be interdicted; that we should oppose it as statesmen, as philanthropists, and as moralists, notwithstanding the extraordinary position taken by the gentleman from Alabama [Mr. HILLIARD] to the contrary.

While I thus announce my unchangeable hostility to Slavery in every form, and in every place, I also avow my determination to stand by all the compromises of the Constitution, and carry them into faithful effect. Some of those compromises I greatly dislike; and, were they now open for consideration, they should never receive my assent. But I find them in a Constitution formed in difficult times, and I would not disturb them.

By those compromises Congress has no power over Slavery in the States. I greatly regret that it is so; for, if it were within our legitimate control, I would go, regardless of all threats, for some just, safe, and certain means for its final extinction. But I know of no one who claims the right, or desires to touch it within the States. But when we come to form Governments for Territories acquired long since the formation of the Constitution, and to admit new States, whose only claim for admission depends on the will of Congress, we are bound so to discharge that duty as shall best contribute to the prosperity, the power, the permanency, and the glory of this nation. Does Slavery contribute to either of these? Is it not rather subversive of them all? Let us first view it in the low light of political economy. That nation, I suppose, is always the most prosperous, all other things being equal, that has the most industrious and the largest number of the producing classes. Those who merely consume the fruits of the earth, add nothing to the strength or wealth of a nation. Slave countries never can have a large number of industrious freemen. Slaveholders form an untitled aristocracy, with numerous dependants. Individuals appropriate large tracts of territory to themselves, and thus prevent it from being thickly settled by freemen. Their laborers, having no ambition to gratify, no love of gain to stimulate them, no parental feelings to impel them to action, are idle and wasteful. When the lash is the only stimulant, the spirit of man revolts from labor.

That Republic must be feeble, both in peace and war, that has not an intelligent and industrious yeomanry, equally removed from luxury and from poverty. The middling classes, who own the soil, and work it with their own hands, are the main support of every free Government. Despotism may be powerful, and long sustained by a mixed population of serfs and nobles. But free representative Republics, that rely upon the voluntary action of the people, never can. Under such Govern-

ments, those who defend and support the country, must have a stake in the soil ; must have interests to protect and rights to defend.

Slave countries never can have such a yeomanry ; never can have a body of small proprietors who own the soil and till it with their own hands, and sit down in conscious independence under their own vine and fig tree. There, there is no sound connecting link between the aristocrat and the slave. True, there is a class of human beings between them ; but they are the most worthless and miserable of mankind. The poor white laborer is the scorn of the slave himself ; for slavery always degrades labor. The white people who work with their hands are ranked with the other laborers—the slaves. They are excluded from the society of the rich. Their associates, if anywhere, are with the colored population. They feel that they are degraded and despised ; and their minds and conduct generally conform to their condition.

The soil occupied by slavery is much less productive than a similar soil occupied by freemen. Men who are to receive none of the wages of their labor do not care to multiply its fruits. Sloth, negligence, improvidence, are the consequence. The land, being neglected, becomes poor and barren ; as it becomes exhausted, it is thrown out as waste, for slave labor never renovates its strength. This applies particularly to agricultural States. Take Virginia, the favorite example for the South, which has been so triumphantly referred to by the gentleman from North Carolina, [Mr. CLINGMAN.] Whence he drew his facts that she was more prosperous, more populous, and more rich, than the free States, I know not. I am sure it was not from personal observation. He would not certainly draw on his imagination in matters of fact. I suppose he must have been misled by the most miserable of sophists, and most false of chroniclers, Ellwood Fisher.

I admit that, by nature, Virginia has capabilities—equal, if not superior, to any State in the Union. She has a delightful climate ; a soil naturally fertile. She is intersected, as was well said by the gentleman from Virginia, [Mr. BAYLY,] by the noblest rivers. Her hills and mountains are filled with rich minerals and covered with valuable timber. She has the finest water-power, I believe, in the nation, in the very heart of her State ; and her harbors are the best in the world. At the time of the adoption of the Constitution, she was the most powerful State—her population was double that of New York. It was the boast of her statesmen that she was *prima inter pares*. What is she now ? The population of New York is more than double—I think the next census will show nearly treble hers. Her land, cultivated by unwilling hands, is unproductive. Travel through the adjoining States of Ohio and Pennsylvania, and you will see that the land produces more than double as much as the same kind of land in Virginia. In the free States, new towns are everywhere springing up and thriving ; the land is becoming more productive ; smiling habitations are within hail of each other ; the whole country is dotted with school-houses and churches almost within sight of each other ; and, except under peculiar circumstances, their manufactures and mechanic arts furnish lucrative employment to all their people ; and their population steadily and rapidly increasing. Turn again to Virginia. There is scarcely a new town, except at one or two points, within her whole borders. Her ancient villages wear the appearance of mournful decay. Her minerals and timbers are unwrought. Her noble water power is but partially occu-

ped. Her fine harbors are without ships, except from other ports ; and her sea-port towns are without commerce, and falling to decay. Ask yourself the cause, sir, and I will abide the answer. It is essential to the existence of Republics that education should be generally diffused among the people. Slavery prevents this. Rich men employ private tutors, or send their children abroad. But the children of the people generally cannot be educated without the instrumentality of district schools. In slave States, where the plantations are large, the white population is too sparse ever to maintain them. Beside, there is another fatal obstacle to them in the aversion of the rich to associate with the poor. The poor white laborer's children could never be permitted to mingle in the same schools, and sit upon the same benches, with the rich men's sons. That would be offensive.

Slavery enfeebles a nation in war, as well as in peace. It is impossible that a nation of masters and slaves can be as powerful and formidable, either in offensive or defensive war, as a nation of freemen. A large portion of her population must remain at home, to prevent the rebellion of those who are constantly in a state of latent warfare with their oppressors. I know, sir, we have had a most alarming description of the prowess of the South. We have heard their cannon roar ; seen their bayonets bristle ; heard the war-cry of the charging chivalry, and seen their bowie-knives gleam within this Hall, in the vivid picture of the terrible gentleman from North Carolina, [Mr. CLINGMAN.]

We have often been modestly reminded of the " blood and treasure, and the gallantry of the South." This I do not dispute. I am proud to admit that she has furnished many gallant sons, whose names will adorn the brightest pages of our history, both for the war of the Revolution, the war of 1812, and the war which we lately assumed as the ally of Texas and of Slavery. I give her full credit for her patriotism in furnishing most of the men who have borne the official burdens of the Government, both in the civil and the military list. I know, too, that she has furnished the kind of men for our armies, who are apt to be distinguished when great deeds are to be done ; for it is only the officers and commanders of armies who live in story. The stout hearts and strong arms of the common soldiers, that fight the battles and win the victories, are unknown to fame. Their birth-place is not sought for ; their graves are undistinguished. And the South has always furnished officers for our armies ; Presidents for the Republic ; most of our foreign ambassadors ; heads of departments ; chiefs of bureaus ; and sometimes, in her proud humility, has consented that the younger sons of her dilapidated houses should monopolize the places of clerks and messengers to the Government. But whence are drawn the common soldiery, the men who peril their lives and win victories for your glory ? Almost entirely from the free States, except in cases of sudden emergency, when volunteers are called nearest the scene of danger. The present Secretary of War, a Southern gentleman of great ability, and strenuous for Southern rights, says, in his report :

"According to the practice which has long prevailed, the great majority of enlistments is made in the Northern Atlantic cities and the adjacent interior towns, whence the recruits are sent to the general depot for instruction, and finally distributed to the Southern and Western posts, according to the wants of the service."

Yes, sir, our Northern freemen have always filled the ranks of the

regular army. The South has lent us the gentlemen to wear the epaulettes and the sword; to take command of our troops, and lead them to Southern and Southwestern climates, to fight the frontier battles, and whiten year fields with their bones.

I am opposed to the diffusion of slavery, because confining it within its present limits will bring the States themselves to its gradual abolition. Let this disease spread, and although it will render the whole body leprous and loathsome, yet it will long survive. Confine it, and like the cancer that is tending to the heart, it must be eradicated, or it will eat out the vitals. The sooner the patient is convinced of this, the sooner he will procure the healing operation.

The learned and able gentleman from Virginia, [Mr. MEADE,] in a pamphlet which he laid upon our table, takes the same view of it. He says: "*Virginia has a slave population of near half a million, whose value is chiefly dependent on Southern demand.*"

Let us pause a moment over this humiliating confession. In plain English, what does it mean? That Virginia is now only fit to be the breeder, not the employer, of slaves. That she is reduced to the condition that her proud chivalry are compelled to turn slave-traders for a livelihood! Instead of attempting to renovate the soil, and by their own honest labor compelling the earth to yield her abundance; instead of seeking for the best breed of cattle and horses to feed on her hills and valleys, and fertilize the land, the sons of that great State must devote their time to selecting and grooming the most lusty sires and the most fruitful wenches, to supply the slave barracoons of the South! And the learned gentleman pathetically laments that the profits of this genteel traffic will be greatly lessened by the circumscription of Slavery! This is his picture, not mine.

The same gentleman says, in the same speech: "*If we intend to submit to the policy of confining the slaves within their present limits, we should commence forthwith the work of gradual emancipation; it is an easier task for us than for our children.*"

The eloquent gentleman from Alabama [Mr. HILLIARD] is of the same opinion. He said: "*We must make up our minds either to resist the interdiction of the progress of slavery, or to submit to an organic change in our institutions.*"

Yes, sir; this admitted result is, to my mind, one of the most agreeable consequences of the legitimate restriction of slavery. Confine this malady within its present limits, surround it by a cordon of freemen that it cannot spread, and in less than twenty-five years, every slave-holding State in this Union will have on its statute books a law for the gradual and final extinction of Slavery. Then will have been consummated the fondest wishes of every patriot's heart. Then will our fair country be glorious, indeed; and be to posterity a bright example of the true principles of government—of universal freedom.

I am opposed to the extension of Slavery into Territories now free, for still graver reasons—because I am opposed to despotism throughout the world. I admit that this Government cannot preach a crusade of liberty into other States and Nations; much as she abhors tyrants and tyranny, there she can only mourn over its existence. But when the question of government is within her own control, and she permits despotism to exist, and aids its diffusion, she is responsible for it in the face of the civilized world, and before the God of Liberty. In

my judgment, not only the slave States, but the General Government, recognising and aiding as it does Slavery, is a despotism. I do not use the word in a declamatory, but strictly legal signification. That Government is despotic where the rulers govern subjects by their own mere will—by decrees and laws emanating from their uncontrolled will, in the enactment and extension of which the ruled have no voice, and under which they have no right, except at the will of the rulers. Despotism does not depend upon the number of the rulers, or the number of the subjects. It may have one ruler or many. Rome was a despotism under Nero; so she was under the triumvirate. Athens was a despotism under her thirty tyrants, under her four hundred tyrants, under her three thousand tyrants. It has been generally observed that despotism increases in severity with the number of despots; the responsibility is more divided, and the claims more numerous. The triumvirs, each demanded his victims. The smaller the number of subjects in proportion to the tyrants, the more cruel the oppression, because the less danger from rebellion. In this Government, the free white citizens are the rulers—the sovereigns, as we delight to be called. All others are subjects. There are, perhaps, some sixteen or seventeen millions of sovereigns, and some four millions of subjects.

The rulers and the ruled are of all colors, from the clear white of Caucasian tribes to the swarthy Ethiopian. The former, by courtesy, are called white; the latter, black. In this Government, the subject has no rights, social, political, or personal. He has no voice in the laws which govern him. He can hold no property. His very wife and children are not his. His labor is another's. He, and all that appertains to him, are the absolute property of his rulers. He is governed, bought, sold, punished, executed, by laws to which he never gave his assent, and by rulers whom he never chose. He is not a serf merely, with half the rights of men, like the subjects of despotic Russia, but a naked slave, stripped of every right which God and nature gave him, and which the high spirit of our Revolution declared inalienable—which he himself could not surrender, and which man could not take from him. Is he not, then, the subject of despotic sway?

The slaves of Athens and of Rome were free, in comparison. They had some rights—could acquire some property—could choose their own masters, and purchase their own freedom; and when free, could rise in social and political life. The slaves of America, then, lie under the most absolute and grinding despotism that the world ever saw. But who are the despots? The rulers of the country—the sovereign people! Not merely the slaveholder who cracks the lash; he is but the instrument of despotism. That despotism is the Government of the slave States, and the United States, consisting of all its rulers—all the free citizens. Do not look upon this as a paradox, because you and I and the sixteen millions of rulers are free. The rulers of every despotism are free. Nicholas of Russia is free. The grand Sultan of Turkey is free. The Butcher of Austria is free. Augustus, Antony, and Lepidus, were free while they drenched Rome in blood. The Thirty Tyrants, the Four Hundred, the Three Thousand, were free while they bound their countrymen in chains. You and I and the sixteen millions are free, while we fasten iron chains and rivet manacles on four millions of our fellow-men, tear their wives and children from them,

separate them, sell them, and doom them to perpetual, eternal bondage. Are we not, then, despots—despots such as history will brand, and God abhors?

But we are told that that is none of our business. That Southern Slavery is a matter between the slaveholders and their own consciences. I trust it may be so decided by impartial history, and the unerring Judge, that we may not be branded with that great stigma, and that grievous burden may not weigh upon our souls. But could we hope for that justification, if now, when we have the power to prevent it, we should permit this evil to spread over thousands of square leagues now free, and settle upon unborn millions? Sir, for myself, I should look upon any Northern man, enlightened by a Northern education, who would directly or indirectly, by omission or commission, by basely voting or cowardly skulking, permit it to spread one rood over God's free earth, as a traitor to liberty and recreant to his God.

Slavery tends to render the people among whom it is planted, arrogant, insolent, intolerant, and tyrannical towards the freemen of other parts of the Union. The honorable member from Virginia, from whom I have already quoted, [Mr. MEADE,] says, speaking of Slavery—

“Our past history testifies to the fact that it elevates the character of the white man. *Though we have been in a numerical minority in the Union for fifty years, yet, during the greater part of that period, we have managed to control the destinies of the Union.* Whether on the battle-field or in the council, the sons of the South have taken the lead; and the records of the nation afford ample testimony of their *superior energy and genius!*”

Sir, I do not complain of this statement. The former part of it is both candid and true. But I cannot listen to the recital without feeling the burning blush on my countenance, that the North, with her overshadowing millions of freemen, has, for half a century, been tame and servile enough to submit to this arrogant rule.

The South imprison Northern freemen when found within her borders, if they happen to be guilty of a dark skin, and carry it “between the wind and their nobility.” And when a sovereign State sends a learned and venerable agent to test the legality of such imprisonment before their own tribunals, he is driven with violence and indignity from their shores. Massachusetts has suffered, and, I trust, remembers the insult.

How often have these walls been profaned, and the North insulted, by the insolent threat, that if Congress legislate against Southern will, it should be disregarded, resisted to extremity, and the Union destroyed. During the present session, we have been more than once told, amidst raving excitement, that if we dared to legislate in a certain way, the South would teach the North a lesson! That their minds were made up to extreme resistance! Is this the place to use threats instead of arguments? Are the Representatives of freemen to be thus treated? True, you are not wholly without justification in the belief that it will be effectual. You have too often intimidated Congress. You have more than once frightened the tame North from its propriety, and found “doughfaces” enough to be your tools. And when you lacked a given number, I take no pride in saying, you were sure to find them in old Pennsylvania, who, in former years, has ranked a portion of her delegation among your most submissive slaves. But I hope, with some fears, that the race of doughfaces is

extinct. I do not see how it could well be otherwise. They were an unmanly, an unvirile race, incapable, according to the laws of nature, of reproduction. I hope they have left no descendants. The old ones are deep in political graves. For them, I am sure there is no resurrection, for they were soulless. Now, when the whole civilized world unites in denouncing Slavery as a curse, a shame, and a crime, I trust that when the great battle between Liberty and Slavery comes to be fought on this floor, there will none be found hiding among the stuff, no fraudulent concealments, not one accursed Achan, in this whole camp of the Representatives of freemen.

The eloquent gentleman from Virginia, [Mr. SEDDON,] the other day, in his beautiful peroration, personated the great States of Virginia, Kentucky, and Louisiana, and in their name apostrophized the good, and, I will add, the great man who now occupies the Executive chair; and besought him, as he loved the place of his birth, the place of his nurture, and the place of his residence, not to forsake his Southern brethren in this emergency, but to stand by them in defence of human bondage. How much more effective, enduring, and hallowed, would that eloquence have been, had the orator's lips been touched with a coal from the Altar of Freedom! Then could he have gone with friendly anxiety to that noble, benevolent, and heroic man, and admonished him, that although he had gathered all the earthly laurels that can be reaped by the sickle of Death, yet, if he would have his name descend to posterity with increasing lustre, he must, by one great, just, and patriotic example, wipe out the only spot that obscures the sun of his glory. He might with propriety have taken with him the learned gentleman from Alabama, [Mr. HILLIARD,] and together have pointed him to that solemn hour, which to him, and to all of us who are treading the down-hill of life, must soon arrive, when the visions of ambition and of earthly wealth shall have passed from before his eyes, and left him nothing but a gaping grave, and an eternal judgment.

The accomplished gentleman from Alabama [Rev. Mr. HILLIARD] might, with peculiar propriety, do what with profane lips I dare not, go to his illustrious friend, and with fervid piety, and eloquence more thrilling than that which made Felix tremble, implore him by a love deeper than that of birth-place, of nurture, and of residence, by the love of his own immortal soul, to be warned in time by the awful, the inexorable doom, "Accursed is the man-stealer." He might, perhaps, have pointed him to the gloomy journey that leads through the dark shadow, and shown him how ineffably brighter are the glories of that Kingdom where *all* are free. Perchance, too, he would have noticed the thronging thousands travelling to that same dread tribunal, summoned to give evidence of deeds done in the body, some of whom were bondsmen and slaves on earth, but whose disembodied spirits were then disenthralled, erect, tall as the proudest of earth's oppressors, and asked him to inquire of his own conscience, who was most likely to meet a hearty welcome there—he whose cause was advocated by the supplicating voices of thousands with whom he had dealt justly on earth, and made free indeed, or he whose admission should be withstood by myriads of crushed and lacerated souls, showing their chains, their stripes, and their wounds, to their Father, and to his Father; to their God, and to his Judge.